

SIN: ITS SPRINGHEAD, STREAM, AND SEA

NO. 2204

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, MAY 10, 1891,
BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“Our fathers understood not Your wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of Your mercies; but provoked Him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.”
Psalm 106:7.*

OUR fathers! From them we derive our nature. We inherit our fathers' propensities, for that which is born of the flesh is flesh. As is the nature, such is the conduct. Hence the Psalmist writes in verse six, “We have sinned with our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly.” If we must mention our fathers' faults, it is not to screen ourselves, for we have to confess that our life's story is no brighter than theirs. It is not because the fathers have eaten sour grapes that the children's teeth are set on edge, for we ourselves have greedily devoured those evil clusters, “We have sinned with our fathers.” “As in water, face answers to face, so the heart of man to man.” When we read of the sins of others, we ought to be humbled and warned, for, “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.” We have no space wherein to set up a monument to our own glory. As we cannot boast in our pedigree, for we are the children of sinners, so we cannot exalt ourselves because of our personal excellence, for there is none that does good, no not one. We come before God and confess our iniquities as a race and as individuals, and we cry unto Him, in the words of the forty-seventh verse, “Save us, O Lord our God.”

It may help us to escape out of the meshes of our natural depravity, if we look back and see the causes of our fathers' sins. To confess our personal sin will tend to keep us humble, and in view of the Lord's mercy, which has spared and pardoned us, a sense of our guilt will make us grateful. The less we think of ourselves the more we shall think of Him whose “mercy endures forever,” and if we see where our fathers' sins began, and how they grew, and what they came to, we may hope that the Spirit of God will help us to turn from the beginnings of evil, and forsake the fountainheads of our iniquities. This will tend to repentance and holiness. May we be so worked upon by the Spirit of God that we shall not be as our earthly fathers, but become like our heavenly Father, who says to us, “Be you followers of God, as dear children.” We are not to take our fathers after the flesh for our example wherein they have gone astray, but our Father who is in heaven we are to imitate by the power of His grace.

Great things, whether good or evil, begin with little things. The river that rolls its mighty volume to the sea was once a tiny brook; no, it started as a springhead, where the child stooped down to drink, and, with a single drink, seemed as if he would exhaust the supply. The rivulet ripples itself into a river. Sin is a stream of this sort. It starts with a thought. It increases to a resolve, a word, an act, it gathers force, and becomes habit, and daring rebellion.

Follow me, therefore, first, when I notice, that *lack of understanding lies at the fountainhead of sin*, “Our fathers understood not Your wonders in Egypt.” Out of this lack of understanding comes the greater offense of ungrateful forgetfulness. *Failure of memory follows upon a lack of understanding*, “They remembered not the multitude of Your mercies.” This readily leads on to the sad consummation of rebellion. *Provocation follows upon forgetfulness*. Inward faults display themselves in outward offenses, “They provoked Him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.”

I. Let us begin at the beginning. LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WONDERS IS THE SOURCE OF SIN. The wonders that God worked in Egypt were exceedingly great and instructive. The ten plagues were memorable masterstrokes of God's judgment upon the proud and notable displays of His favor to the oppressed. How Egypt staggered beneath the blows of Jehovah! Those tremendous

judgments came one after another with righteous deliberation, and yet with terrible rapidity. Pharaoh and his proud nobles were wounded and humbled; the leviathan of Egypt was broken in pieces as one that is slain. Surely they for whom all these plagues were worked ought to have considered them, and ought to have spied out the plain lessons which they taught, but they failed to do so, for they were dull of understanding. Albeit, God had come out of His secret places, and had made bare His arm for them, yet “our fathers understood not Your wonders in Egypt.”

We see this to be the case when we read the story, for at first, when God began to work for them, they were *so taken up with the present* that they complained of Moses, for the cruel retort of Pharaoh. He had gone in unto the proud monarch, and had urged the demand of Jehovah, and the tyrant had replied, “You hinder the people from their works; get you unto your burdens.” He increased their toil, by refusing to give the people straw to make bricks, and so their bondage was made bitter to the last degree, and they groaned as they saw “that they were in evil case.” They are not blamed for groaning, but it was very blameworthy that they should say to Moses and Aaron, “The Lord look upon you, and judge; because you have made our savor to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hands to slay us.” It was mean to blame their friends for the cruel fault of their enemy. How wretchedly have we also complained when God, in His gracious dealings with us, has caused us an inward grief! He began to show us our sin—a very necessary thing, but we kicked against it and said, “Is this the grace of God? Oh, that we were rid of these convictions!” Thus the Lord took away our self-confidence, but we were full of unbelief, and we thought some great evil had happened to us, whereas it was the way of God’s wisdom and love to make sin as much a bondage to us as Egypt was to Israel. How else would we feel our need of redemption, and be willing to come forth free by the blood of the Lamb? If the Lord does but lay His little finger upon us we complain, and instead of seeing love in our affliction, we cry out as if the Lord dealt harshly with us. His mercy designs to teach us some great lesson for our eternal benefit, and we murmur and ask, “Is this, the love of God to His chosen?” Our fathers understood not His wonders in Egypt, and oftentimes this is our case; we judge by the feelings of the present, and forget the eternal future. We cannot understand our burdens and our soul-humbling; we stand bewildered and amazed. Though the point is plain enough to faith, unbelief does not hear the rod, or Him that has appointed it, and we are taken up with our present smart. Our selfish desire for immediate comfort prevents our understanding the great plans of divine grace.

Further on we find Israel *broken down by utter hopelessness*. Moses spoke to them again, but we read, “They hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage.” They had been so brutally crushed by the Egyptians, that they had lost all heart. Slavery had killed all the manhood of their race; they were abject, timorous, and crouching bondsmen. The last ounce that breaks the camel’s back was laid on them by Pharaoh, and they could no more listen to words of hope. Moses said he had come to deliver them; He told them they should be brought out with a high hand and an outstretched arm, but they could not think it possible; they shook their heads, and turned a deaf ear to what they regarded as vain words. Hope had fled. They understood not that God could, by any possible means, deliver them from the gigantic power which held them down. Alas! This also has been the case with us, and perhaps is the case with some here at this moment. You are so sad and so depressed that you cannot believe in salvation. Your presumptuous hopes lie dead in heaps round about you and you cannot believe that you will ever be saved. “Oh!” you say, “there may be mercy for someone else, but there is no mercy for me. God can forgive the chief of sinners, but He will never forgive me.” Though we tell you of free grace and dying love, and of pardon for sins of deepest dye, a pardon bought with Jesus’ blood, you turn a deaf ear to us because your spirit is wounded and faint. You understand not God’s wonders for and in you. You cannot think that indeed and of a truth the Lord Jesus loved you, and gave Himself for you. You dare not hope that He has ordained you unto eternal life, that He will put His Spirit within you, and that He will give you power to become children of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. Your very sorrow for sin has made you incapable of understanding God’s wonders of grace. This is a painful state of mind.

You see, dear friends, these people, though they saw God’s plagues on the Egyptians, which were mercies to Israel, yet *they did not enter into their teaching*. One would have thought that every Israelite would have said, when the thick darkness was over all the land, even “darkness that might be felt,” surely Jehovah is a great and mighty God. When there was a storm of thunder and hail over all Egypt, the likes of which had never been known before, would it not have been natural for them to cry, “Who is

like unto You, O Jehovah? We, Your people, bow before Your majesty!" The right-minded Israelite would have prostrated himself before the supreme *power* of God, and would have never henceforth doubted the Lord's ability to redeem His chosen nation.

Should not Israel have also learned the royal *sovereignty* of the Lord God? What armies obeyed the call of that great King! At His word the river brought forth frogs abundantly. He spoke, and there came divers sorts of flies, and lice in all their borders. "He spoke, and the locusts came, and caterpillars and that without number, and did eat up all the herbs in their land, and devoured the fruit of their ground." Jehovah's camp is very great. The waters were turned into blood, and the dust into creeping things; the heavens were set on fire, and the habitations of men were darkened.

He who did all these marvelous things is King over all the earth. "He smote all the first-born in Egypt, the chief of their strength." Even the first-born of Pharaoh that sits on the throne was made to die. Surely Jehovah is King of kings. Would you not have thought that His people would have felt the force of His divine *dominion*, and would have bowed before His supreme will throughout the rest of their lives? Awed by His power and glory, we might have expected to find in Israel a loyal people. But no, they neither seemed to tremble before the power, nor to bow before the sovereignty of Jehovah; but they murmured against Him, and declared that He could not deliver them, and complained that they had been brought out of Egypt to die by the hand of Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

Beyond all question, they ought to have recognized Jehovah's *love* to them. By so much as the plagues were terrible to Egypt they were gracious to His people. Though the Israelites were a race of down-trodden slaves the Lord loved them. He moved heaven and earth to liberate them; He not only made the very dust of Egypt alive for them, but He sent swift angels out of heaven to avenge the wrongs of His chosen. The orbs of heaven and the creatures of earth—all were brought to bear upon God's great purpose of grace towards Israel. Truly said the Lord, "I gave Egypt for Your ransom: Ethiopia and Seba for You." It was love, wondrous love to Israel, which made the Lord to show His signs in Egypt, His wonders in the land of Ham! Why did they not become lovingly obedient in return for such favors? Why were they, hard of heart, and stiff of neck, and unwilling to be led of the Lord their God? Alas! They understood not what the Lord was doing for them.

To you, beloved, it may be that the same fault can be laid. God has done great wonders for believers, but, it may be, we have not yet learned His power so as to trust His might; nor His sovereignty, so as to submit to His will; nor His love, so as to rejoice in His faithfulness. Alas! We have but little understanding; no, worse, we have none at all except as the Lord, the Holy Spirit, teaches us to profit, and instructs us, as children are instructed.

The tribes of Israel *did not see in all this the claim which the Lord had upon them*. As a people, they belonged to Him who had made them a nation. Because of what He had done for them, the Lord took up a peculiar position to them, which He would have them acknowledge. Remember how, in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, before the Lord proclaims His ten commands, He says—"I am the Lord your God, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." By this, Jehovah separated them to be His people, and He declared Himself to be their God. During the plagues, He marked His special love to His own, for when the Lord sent a thick darkness over all the land, we read, "But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings." When the cattle of Egypt died, Pharaoh sent and found, upon inquiry, that "there was not one of the cattle of the Israelites dead." When the first-born of Egypt fell dead beneath the angel's sword, the sprinkled blood of the Passover lamb secured to all Israel protection from the midnight slaughter, and men were made to know that God did put a difference between His chosen and the men of Egypt. Yet, the favored people did not understand it; the truth was conspicuous enough, but they did not perceive it as they ought to have done, neither did they practically show that they were the Lord's people, and that only He was their God. The same slowness to take up our true position, we may see and mourn in ourselves. After all the Lord's wonders of grace towards us, we do not exalt Him as our God, nor serve Him as His people, as we ought to do. Lord, have mercy upon us!

The people did not see that *their God by all His wonders was pledging Himself to them*. After having done so much for them, He would not leave them. Could He have brought them out of Egypt to kill them at the Red Sea? They even dared to say that this was their suspicion. Oh, the slanders of unbelief! But if they had understood His wonders, they would have seen that He who had done such great things for

them had bound Himself to perfect His purpose, and to bring them into the land which He had promised to their fathers. “Ah!” you say, “they were very stupid.” I do not defend them, but what about yourselves? Have we not been mistrustful? Have we not said in our hearts, “He will yet fail us, and our faith will be disappointed”? Alas, great God, we blush and are ashamed! But, listen—

*“Determined to save, He watched o’er my path
When, Satan’s blind slave, I sported with death;
And can He have taught me to trust in His name,
And thus far have brought me to put me to shame?”*

Will the Lord lose all that He has worked in us, and for us? Is He like the foolish one, who began to build and was not able to finish? Does the Eternal revoke His resolves? Does the Almighty turn from His purposes? Is it not said, “The strength of Israel will not lie; for He is not a man, that He should lie, nor the son of man, that He should repent”? O believer, learn this lesson well, and trust in your unchanging God; thus shall you understand His wonders in Egypt.

The fact is, dear friends, *these people had no deeply spiritual work upon their hearts*. “They understood not His wonders in Egypt,” because their hearts were hardened by their association with a proud, worldly, idolatrous and yet cultured nation, and they had turned aside from the spiritual faith of their fathers. Wonders were worked, and they saw them, and were amazed, but they did not see beneath the surface, nor perceive the Lord’s meaning in them. Beloved, I pray to God for you who are newly called out from the world, that the first working of grace in your souls may be deep, true, clear, and lasting. I would have you not only know, but *understand*. Depend upon it a man’s later character is very much shaped by the mode of his conversion. Why do some turn back altogether? It is because their change of heart was not that thorough radical conversion which involves the creation of a new nature. They felt certain superficial impressions which they mistook for the new birth, and they made a hasty profession which they could not afterwards maintain. They were not thoroughly saved from the dominion of sin, or they would have held on to the end. Many professing Christians of whom we have a good hope that they will prove to be sincere, never had any deep conviction of sin, or any overwhelming sense of their need of Jesus; hence they have seen little of our Lord in His glorious offices, and all-sufficient sacrifice, and have gained no thorough understanding of His truth. They are like slovenly farmers, who have plowed their fields after a fashion, but they have not gone deep, and the land will never yield more than half a crop. We have all around us too much surface work. Numbers of conversions are true as far as they go, but they go a very little way. I am afraid for you if you have only a flimsy experience, a skin-deep conviction, a blind man’s apprehension of the heavenly light. No wonder if very soon you forget, and afterwards rebel. Let us pray God that both in ourselves, and in those whom we bring to Christ, the work of grace may be deep and thorough, and may our faith in Jesus be sustained by a clear understanding of the gospel, and of our Lord’s dealings with us! The truth of itself, and our experience of it, may be likened to food; it is not the food we swallow which benefits us, but that which we digest. If food lies in our inward parts undigested, and unassimilated, it will breed disease rather than promote health, so truth which is not understood, and thus taken up into the soul, cannot “feed” us in the true spiritual sense of that word. You see, brethren, here was a flaw in the Israelites at the beginning, “They understood not Your wonders in Egypt.” When an iron girder suddenly snaps, they tell us that there was a flaw in the original casting. It was quite imperceptible at the first, and therefore the girder passed all the tests of the engineer, and it was not until years of wear and tear that it gave way. Here was a manifest flaw in the casting as to the people of Israel, “They understood not Your wonders in Egypt.” Had they well understood the truth at the very first, they would not and could not have forgotten it, and they would not have been so little influenced by it in their conduct towards God.

So much upon the first point. We have had before us a subject which should produce great thoughtfulness, and devout anxiety.

II. FAILURE OF MEMORY FOLLOWS UPON LACK OF UNDERSTANDING. Children forget what they learn unless they understand it. They may pass the School Board standards, and yet in a few years, they may know very little. The capacity for forgetting in some children is amazing. Many, even among grownups have splendid memories for forgetting. Alas! It is the case with certain of the Lord’s people. That which we do not understand, we readily forget. When a child understands his lesson thoroughly, it will be fixed in his memory, but if he has merely learned the words, and has not entered into

their sense, do you wonder that his lesson slips away? So was it with Israel in Egypt and at the Red Sea. Those sentences follow each other in true logical order, “They understood not Your wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of Your mercies.”

Mercies should be remembered. It is a great wrong to God when we bury His mercies in the grave of unthankfulness. Especially is this the case with distinguishing mercies, wherein the Lord makes us to differ from others. Light, when the rest of the land is in darkness! Life, when others are smitten with the sword of death! Liberty from an iron bondage! O Christians, these are not things to be forgotten! Abundantly utter the memory of distinguishing mercies! Discriminating grace deserves unceasing memorials of praise.

Mercies multiplied should never be forgotten. If they are new every morning, our memory of them should be always fresh. Read the story of the ten plagues, and see how the Lord heaped up His mercies upon Israel with both His hands. Even if they had forgotten one wonder they ought to have remembered others. “Forget not all His benefits.” Alas! Some men, though their memories are refreshed with renewed loving kindnesses, yet prove by their discontent and mistrust that they do not remember the Lord’s goodness. A grievous thing is this, when God sends mercy, and mercy, and mercy, and mercy, and mercy—heaps of mercies, loads of mercies, hills of mercies, mountains of mercies, worlds of mercies, and yet men forget. His mercies are more than the stars, more than the drops of dew, more than the sands on the seashore, and yet we do not remember. This is a mournful and inexcusable fault!

“They remembered not the multitude of Your mercies.” That is to say, *they did not remember these blessings permanently*. They remembered the Lord’s wonders a little, and then they sang, but when the song was over, their memories failed. They remembered God’s mercies while they marched for the first few days as free men, who had no daily task of brick-making to fulfill, but when they found that Pharaoh pursued them they forgot all the Lord’s mighty acts. When they tasted the waters of Marah, and found them bitter, “they murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?” They forgot God’s wonders whenever they were in straits, and limited The Holy One of Israel by their unbelief. “They soon forgot His works; they waited not for His counsel; but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert.” Our remembrance of the Lord’s wonders of love should abide with us all our days. May the Lord give us a permanent recollection of His great goodness, both in providence and in grace! Hutton, Bishop of Durham, was one day riding over the bleak northern hills. He stopped, and, giving his horse to his servant, he went aside from the road to kneel down on a certain spot. He always did so when he reached that place, for in the day of his wealth and honor he had not forgotten that when he was a poor boy he had crossed those wild hills, without shoes and stockings, and had turned a cow out of her place that he might warm his feet with what little heat remained in the place where the creature had lain. He had become bishop of a rich see, and a man of renown, but he never passed that spot without kneeling down and praising God. May we have faithful memories for the goodness of our faithful God! The Israelites had memories out of which the mercies of God soon faded. The Lord save us from being like them, and cause us to bless His name for what He did for us fifty years ago! Some of us would not have been among His people today if it had not been for the Lord’s favors in our early youth, therefore let us praise Him for old mercies as well as for new ones.

But Israel *did not remember God’s mercies powerfully*. If they recollected these things, yet the remembrance did not enable them to bear up under present discouragements. The Egyptians pursued them, and when they heard the cracking of the whips, and the neighing of the horses, they cried out unto the Lord, and whined out, “It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” Had they forgotten Jehovah, who had glorified Himself over Egypt, and had crippled all her power? Their memory of Jehovah’s wonders had not influence enough over them to keep up their courage! Oh, for such a powerful memory of God’s mercies that we may never distrust Him!

They did not remember practically. Their lives were not affected thereby. True gratitude shows itself in acts and deeds. A gentleman had been the means of making a position for a tradesman, and by a misfortune he came to be himself in need of immediate help to tide over a season of great pressure. He called at the house of the person he had so successfully helped, and found the wife at home. He told her the case, and she answered at once, “My husband will be ready to lend you his name to the full amount required. He will hasten to you the moment you need him, and be glad to do so.” A prudent neighbor

afterwards said, “But you may have to pay away all you have in the world.” “Yes,” said the grateful wife, “we do not mind that; he was the making of us, and if we have to lose everything for his sake, we shall do it very cheerfully, for we shall only be back to where we were when he first helped us.” That is a form of gratitude which is rare enough in this world, though I have seen it here and there. Beloved, if the Lord were to take away all that we have, we should only be back where we were at the beginning. We have nothing but what we have received from Him. He takes nothing from us but what He first gave us; let us bless a taking as well as a giving God. Oh, for this practical gratitude towards the Lord, that we may in all things either do His will cheerfully, or suffer it patiently! If we remember the multitude of His mercies practically we shall be ready to surrender honor, ease, health, estate, yes, life itself for Him who gave Himself for us. Oh, to remember God’s mercies practically in everyday life, in thought and word, and deed!

In fact, *the Lord’s mercies ought to be remembered progressively*. We should think more and more of His exceeding kindness. A Christian man’s life should be like another Bible, another Book of Chronicles. When we come to read through our personal life story, we should say—“neither the ninth chapter of Nehemiah, nor the hundred-and-sixth psalm can exceed my experience. The Lord has dealt well with His servant, according to His word. If some of us had opportunity to write our lives in full—which we could hardly venture to do, because there are private passages between our souls and our God which no human eye may read—how fully could we now testify to the faithful love of our covenant God! On our parts, sin and weakness and fickleness have been conspicuous in our career, but on the Lord’s part, grace and truth, and faithfulness and love, shine forth as the sun. Beloved, we must not let go of the memory of the Lord’s matchless kindness, but we must remember it more and more. The older we are, the more must we trust in Him, who has not suffered one of His promises to fail.

III. I want a little time for the third head, which is this; GRIEVOUS PROVOCATION FOLLOWED THEIR FORGETFULNESS OF GOD. Lack of understanding begat forgetfulness, and forgetfulness brought forth rebellion. Let me read the last part of the text, “They provoked Him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.” Why does the Psalmist dwell upon the place, and say, “at the sea, even at the Red Sea”? Why was it worse to provoke the Lord there than elsewhere? It evidently was so, for the inspired Scripture mentions the spot twice to put an emphasis upon it. Why was this?

The offense itself was grievous anywhere. They doubted God when they heard that Pharaoh pursued after them, and they said, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have You taken us away to die in the wilderness?” This imputation of cruelty to their faithful God provoked His sacred heart. The Lord is full of pity, and His name is love, and therefore He is not easily provoked, but He declares that He was provoked by this display of their mistrust. They provoked Him; they called Him forth, as it were, to battle; they vexed Him, and stirred Him up to contend with them. O brothers and sisters, after so much love as God has shown us, we must not fall to provoking Him; let us far rather spend our lives in extolling Him! To provoke Him at any time is a wanton wickedness—unjust, ungenerous, diabolical. It is no common sin which thus provokes the long-suffering Lord. Many a sin God has endured patiently, but in this case He is provoked to anger. This is an offense which touches the apple of His eye, and causes His jealousy to burn like coals of fire. O children of God, how can you provoke your Father to wrath? The Lord have mercy upon us! We must bow low at His feet with sorrowful repentance. Let us shun this fault in the future.

But why did their transgression at the sea so greatly anger the Lord? Was it because *it came at the outset of their existence as a nation*? They had not gone many days’ journey out of Egypt before they rebelled. They had not yet eaten up the bread they carried in their kneading troughs, and they had scarcely met their first difficulty, and yet they hastened to provoke their God. How could they rebel so soon? They had scarcely reached the Red Sea before they began provoking the Lord with their dishonorable suspicions. O young Christian, if you provoke the Lord as soon as you are converted, your conduct will be black indeed. Only a day or two ago you sang His praises, and shouted, “Hallelujah! The blood of the Lamb has saved me.” Will you so speedily distrust the Lord, and provoke Him “at the sea, even at the Red Sea”? What! Stumble in the first few steps? God grant it may not be so! If you feel that you have already thus provoked the Lord, confess the wrong, and ask pardon through the precious blood. To begin to doubt almost as soon as you begin to believe is a wretched business. What! Have you come out of Egypt, and have you brought its bondage with you? You have been saved by the sprinkled blood, and

you have fed upon the Paschal lamb, and can you so soon utter words dishonoring to your delivering Lord? To doubt in the presence of a mercy is to doubt indeed. To doubt the power of the blood of Christ when you have newly been saved, to doubt the power of the Holy Spirit to keep you to the end when you have just been renewed—why, this is aggravated guilt! It is sadly common, but it is none the less grievous to the heart of God. He marks it down, and there stands the record—“They provoked Him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.” This is a poor beginning of a march to Canaan.

Now *this Red Sea was the place of their consecration*. Here they were “baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Here it was that they said, “He is my God, and I will prepare Him an habitation; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him.” As they stood by that Red Sea which had swallowed up all their enemies, they sang the praises of God, and proposed to do great things in His honor. What wonderful obedience they meant to render! And yet they provoked Him there and then. What! Will you come up from the waters of your baptism, and go home and provoke God by unholy conversation and ungovernable temper? Can any of you go from the Communion Table into sin? I heard of one who went from the table of the Lord across the street into the public-house. This is too gross. Such conduct grieves holy men, and much more the Holy God. To go from prayer to robbery, from reading the Word to fellowship with ungodly men—this must be terribly provoking to the thrice holy Jehovah. It is as though it were written again, “They provoked Him at the sea, even at the Red Sea.”

It is a high crime and misdemeanor to sin in the presence of a great mercy. There is the sea; they have just marched through it, and they have reached Marah, where the waters are brackish. If they now distrust and complain, close on the heels of their great deliverance, it will be a crime indeed. O men, what are you doing? There is the Red Sea which God divided, and yet you think He cannot give you water to drink! O fools and slow of heart, thus to doubt the Almighty! Doubt in the presence of a mercy! Doubt while so great a favor is before your eyes! This is evil indeed! I find the Hebrew has been read by some, “They provoked Him in the sea, even in the Red Sea”—while they were passing through the deep they were rebelling. You will hardly believe it! What! When the waters stood upright as in an heap, and were a wall on either side of them, and they walked through the depths of the sea, and found good footing where sea monsters once had whelped and stabled—were they then provoking Him? Yes, they carried their sinful hearts with them even into the heart of the sea. O beloved, do not bear hard upon these Israelites, bear hard upon yourselves, and hate the sin which dares intrude within the sacred enclosures of your joy in the cross, and dares to tempt you even when the five wounds of Jesus are shining on your soul like stars of God. Hate the sins which follow you to the Table of the Lord. Hate the wandering mind which taints the sacred bread and wine, and defiles you when the instructive symbols are yet in your mouths. Abhor the sin which dogs your heel, and follows you even to your knees, and hinders you in drawing near to God in prayer. Oh, the accursed sin which even on Tabor’s top makes us fall asleep or talk foolishly! Lord, have mercy upon us, and forgive the sins of our holy places, and let it not stand against us in your book that “They provoked You at the sea, even at the Red Sea.” It was called the Sea of Weeds, and truly many were the weeds which grew, not only in the water, but in the hearts of those who stood on its shore.

I must give one or two touches to complete the picture. This provocation of God was all the worse because *they had only just done singing*. What a song it was! Handel with all the majesty of his half-inspired music can hardly set forth that wondrous song of Israel at the sea. “I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea.” That was a noble anthem, but murmuring was a miserable sequel to it. “The Lord shall reign forever and ever” was a glorious hallelujah, but before its echoes had ceased to stir the heart of the lone hills, the same tongues were heard to complain against the Lord. “The Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation,” died away into mutterings of unbelief. Do you wonder that God was provoked? Have you ever acted so? Did you ever rise high in rapture, and praise the Lord upon the high-sounding cymbals, and then find yourself groveling on the ground within an hour? Have you felt so jubilant that you could have snatched Gabriel’s silver trumpet from his mouth that you might blow it with all your might, and have you before long been looking for a mouse hole in which to hide your miserable head by reason of your unbelief. What fools we are! “Verily every man at his best estate is altogether vanity.” When we know most, we are ignorant; when we swell to our greatest, we are big nothings. When God makes much of

us, we think least of ourselves. How greatly do we prize and praise the precious blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin!

This evil happened near the time of their strong faith. You remember how they sang, “Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away. Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of Your arm they shall be as still as a stone; till Your people pass over, O Lord, till the people pass over, which You have purchased. You shall bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, in the place, O lord, which You have made for You to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established.” They felt quite sure of conquering the land, and chasing out the foe. They were so strong in faith, that they thought they should never again mistrust the Lord, whose right hand was so glorious in power. The exultant women who followed Miriam never suspected that they could doubt the Lord, whose right hand had dashed in pieces the enemy. One of them would probably have said, “As for our enemies, the depths have covered them, there is not one of them left. I shall never fear again. I have attained full assurance and perfection, and I shall never again mistrust the Lord.” Yet these were the people who speedily murmured for lack of bread, until the Lord heard them, and was grieved. I dare say the men of the Red Sea said each one, “My mountain stands firm, I shall never be moved”; and yet in how brief an hour were they challenging the faithfulness of Jehovah, and questioning His power to give them bread in the wilderness! Lord, what is man? We distrust providence, we suspect grace, and we question the Lord Himself, and all this after the Lord had made our assurance doubly sure. We are sad creatures, and yet the Lord does not cast us away, for it is written, “Nevertheless He saved them for His name’s sake, that He might make His mighty power to be known.”

Two things more and I have done. *Admire the patient faithfulness of our God.* Jehovah, though provoked, still loves His people. Admire His love to ourselves, and especially that He should entertain such constancy of affection towards such wayward, fickle, unreliable souls as we are!

Next, *believe God so as to cease to grieve Him.* Do not start aside at the next little puddle you see in the road; it is not an ocean. Do not whine that you will be devoured the next time you see a cat in the garden; it is not a lion after all. Do not groan, “I cannot pass this dread abyss,” for it is only a little ditch, which you can leap by faith. God helping you, rest not till you become “strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.” Doubt God when He gives you cause to do so, but not till then. If God had left those Israelites once, they might have had some excuse for distrusting Him, but He had never done so. If He had ever failed in His judgments, they might have had some excuse for unbelief, but when He threatened their enemies with plagues those plagues never failed to come. Was there a single weak point in what God had done for them? They had no ground whatever, for their unbelief. O brothers, let us never distrust our God until He gives us ground for so doing; and that will be never. O Blessed Holy Spirit, strengthen the faith of Your people this day, and may that faith create in us perfect obedience to the will of the Lord, so that henceforth we may magnify His holy name, and walk with Him until we see His face unveiled above! The Lord sanctify us unto Himself, for Jesus’ sake! Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—PSALM 106.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—914, 688, 106.

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